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Viewing cable 07ATHENS550, PROPOSED U.S. STATEMENT ON GREEK ISLAND OF AGIOS

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
07ATHENS550	2007-03-15 14:59	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Athens

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/15/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: PROPOSED U.S. STATEMENT ON GREEK ISLAND OF AGIOS
EFSTRATIOS

REF: ATHENS 459

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The recent dispute between Greece and Turkey over the status of the island of Agios Efstratios, which led to NATO's cancellation of its participation in a February 27 exercise, has received major press and government attention here. The GoG instructed its Pemrep to NATO Ambassador Sevas to raise it with NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer, but the SYG reportedly declined to get involved. As DAS Bryza promised during his visit to Athens March 13, the U.S. should make a statement in the lead-up to, or during, FM Bakoyannis' March 22 visit to Washington affirming U.S. view that Agios Efstratios is not/not a de-militarized island under any treaty. Furthermore, Embassy proposes demarches to Athens and Ankara explaining our position and stating firmly our wish not to be further involved in their squabbles over Aegean islands. We believe this statement and demarches will help stop further deterioration of NATO's reputation in Greece and reduce U.S. future involvement in Aegean disputes. END SUMMARY.

SQUABBLING IN THE AEGEAN

¶2. (C) BACKGROUND (see also reftel): The long-standing dispute over the status of various islands in the Aegean hinges on different interpretations of several treaties that designated a dozen or so named Greek islands near Turkey as "de-militarized." Beginning in the 1990s, GoT statements have argued that the other several thousand Greek islands not named specifically in the treaties may be considered "grey zones" of un-determined status. The latest exchange in this debate centers on the de-militarized status of the Greek island of Agios Efstratios, which arose in connection with a planned NATO exercise on February 27. The Turkish CAOC 6 commander advised NATO that the island was "one of the demilitarized islands" under international treaties. Greece further muddled the waters by issuing a NOTAM stating that Agios Efstratios and the island of Limnos (whose de-militarized status, while also debated, has de facto been acknowledged by both sides) would be part of the NATO exercise area. NATO withdrew its participation from the exercise, citing its long-standing policy not to become involved in disagreements between member states.

¶3. (C) The cancellation provoked considerable press and government consternation in Greece. Always wary of NATO, both interpreted "neutrality" on NATO's part as lending support to Turkey's claim that Aegean islands constitute undetermined "grey zones." Embassy has found no evidence or precedent to support claims that Agios Efstratios (which is not mentioned in any of the relevant treaties) is a de-militarized island. Indeed, following a similar argument over the island of Gavdos in 1996, President Clinton stated that there was no question about Greek sovereignty.

GREEK ASKS BRYZA TO STEP IN

¶4. (C) On the margins of the March 13 Greece-U.S. ECC, Greek MFA spokesman Giorgos Koumoutsakos asked DAS Bryza to make a statement affirming the U.S. view that Agios Efstratios is not a de-militarized island. Bryza declined to make an immediate statement but committed the U.S. to go on-record on the issue in the lead-up to, or during, Greek FM Bakoyannis, March 22-23 visit to Washington.

WHY WE SHOULD DO IT

¶5. (C) NATO's ability to conduct exercises near Agios Efstratios is not crucial to its operations in the Aegean or eastern Mediterranean. But the wide-spread perception in Greece that Turkey can use NATO to score points in disputes over islands, and that NATO has no capacity to differentiate spurious claims from valid arguments, is extremely damaging to NATO's image amongst Greeks, many of whom are reflexively

anti-American and, by association, critical of NATO. The GoG has run political risks in making even its modest contributions to NATO's operations in Afghanistan. NATO and the U.S. cannot expect the GoG to make an effort to contribute more to NATO if the Greek public believes that NATO is willing to allow itself to be used by Greece's chief regional rival.

PROPOSED PLAN OF ACTION

16. (C) At the same time, we have no desire to allow the Greeks to use NATO or us in a similar way for their own ends.

Our goal, thus, is not to maintain a "balance" in relations between Greece and Turkey but to avoid being dragged deeper into the fray. Given recent events, we propose the following steps to help repair the situation:

-- During the week of March 19 in the lead-up to FM Bakoyannis' March 22-23 visit to Washington, an appropriate U.S. official (U/S Burns or DAS Bryza) should make the following on-record statement: "the U.S. does not consider Agios Efstratios to be de-militarized under any treaty."

-- We should inform Turkey that this statement is not directed against it. The statement simply expresses our view of the new Turkish argument on the status of Agios Efstratios and does not imply that we are in any way changing our even-handed position on the long-standing disagreement over islands like Limnos and Lesbos. We should also inform Turkey that within NATO, we would not support the GoT position on Agios Efstratios.

-- We should inform the Greeks that we intend to issue the statement. If Greece intends to raise the issue further with the NATO SYG or in the NAC in order to re-schedule the exercise, Greece will have our support, but we will not do the heavy lifting for them.

-- We should further inform Greece that our cooperation in NATO and as strategic partners depends on good communication.

We were disappointed that the GoG released full details to the press on the Agios Efstratios incident a full day before informing us of its concerns. The GoG should view the U.S.

-- and not the Greek press -- as its chief ally on NATO issues.

-- We should also note to the Greeks that it was not helpful of them to release a NOTAM in advance of the February 27 exercise mentioning both Agios Efstratios and Limnos. Mentioning the de facto de-militarized island of Limnos, for whatever motives, unnecessarily raised tensions and created a tit-for-tat atmosphere. The U.S. is not interested in playing such games and does not appreciate either NATO or the U.S. being dragged into them.

COUNTRYMAN